

Introductory Remarks to Indigenous Economic Forum: Economic Development Barriers, Opportunities and Pathways

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In our deliberations over the next two days, it is important that we do not lose sight of the complexity of the issue we are addressing—economic development for Aboriginal Australians in a multi-cultural, but currently white-dominated, Northern Territory economy—nor of the need to find some creative solutions. We need to find the realistic trade-off between deep despondency and excessive optimism.

The very issue that we are addressing ‘economic development’ is not uncontested even among economists. At one end of the spectrum are those who see development as a ‘process of expanding the real freedom that people enjoy’. At the other end of the spectrum are narrower, more conventional, notions like economic growth measured by per capita income, formal employment and independence from welfare.

In the NT today there is enormous diversity in the residential circumstances of Aboriginal people, ranging from those who live in tiny isolated communities on Aboriginal land to those who live in the suburbs of Darwin or Alice Springs—these though are not discrete extremes because an increasing number of Aboriginal people today move between both.

Similarly, economic development aspirations range widely from a desire for engagement with the market, via jobs or businesses, to a desire for engagement with customary activities, a focus on distinctly Aboriginal ways. Again these are not discrete categories, customary activity, like art production, can be for the market, and formal employment like in ‘caring for country’ can be customary. In many situations people’s choices between these two options is heavily constrained by a history of marginalisation, where they live, land ownership and important cultural priorities. In less common situations, people can freely choose to move between mainstream and Aboriginal economies.

In development debates, white notions of development are far less diverse, more committed to the market and more powerful, and hence they tend to dominate. Indigenous notions of development are often unheard or poorly heard because in Australia’s economic system, Indigenous people often lack the political power to be heard and in the competition over the meaning of development their more diverse views are often ignored. This is a mistake that we must avoid here at all costs, here we have an opportunity to hear black, yolngu, bininj, yapa, anangu ideas about development and economic futures.

Economies everywhere are the same, they are made up of the market or private sector, the state or public sector, and what is sometimes called the informal sector. The informal sector can be a somewhat negative term that reflects market-orientation; what is informal from one cultural perspective, can be formal and highly valued from another, for Aboriginal people the term ‘customary sector’ is more meaningful and accurate. In the NT economy the public sector is large; while for Aboriginal communities, the customary sector can be large, but it is highly variable and generally unrecognised by the mainstream.

In our deliberations, we need to consider how Aboriginal engagements with the market, the state and the customary sectors can be enhanced to ensure better economic outcomes first for Aboriginal people, then for the Territory. Let me offer a few observations:

Aboriginal engagements with the market are already occurring via jobs in many sectors, such as mining, tourism, national parks and service delivery and via unique Indigenous industries like the arts and cultural tourism. These engagements need to expand but there are barriers: inappropriate corporate structures; lack of access to finance; insecurity of supply; and political instability. There are also regulatory barriers, like restrictions on community-based commercial fisheries and lack of legally recognised resource rights. Some of these artificial barriers need to be dismantled urgently.

It is imperative that as new opportunities arise, in areas such as commercial utilisation of wildlife, carbon credit trading, salinity minimisation and biodiversity maintenance—activities of great conservation benefit for all of the NT, and indeed the nation—any newly-created property rights are captured and owned by Aboriginal people, rather than being lost as in the past.

Relations with the state—NT and federal—for Aboriginal people have been historically fraught, largely because of their minority status and dispersed circumstances. More positive engagement with the state has grown rapidly over the last 30 years, but arguably not fast enough in many situations, hence the backlogs in quality of housing and infrastructure like roads, access to education and health services. The modern liberal state still struggles with the delivery of true equity—needs-based service delivery to all citizens. And for political reasons, past inequities and legacies will not be corrected quickly, the small Territory electorates are too volatile for radical change.

The state, the public sector, will remain significant for many Aboriginal communities and the cost of service delivery will remain high because of their small size and remoteness. It is important that state services are provided more efficiently and effectively, that we look to improve modes of delivery rather than getting too caught up in talk of economic independence from the state. Better delivery will require: greater co-ordination between agencies; recognition of the inter-dependencies between services delivered; the reduction of duplication; and greater regional cooperation. Finding innovation for better service delivery will not be easy, but it is a truism that better outcomes for a similar level of expenditure are both possible and urgently needed.

The Aboriginal customary sector is poorly understood, even by those who support and resource it. This sector extends well beyond activities like wildlife harvesting and natural resource management that Aboriginal people always undertook, to activities tackling contemporary problems like feral animals and invasive weeds and pests. For many Aboriginal people, investment in ceremony is also a major part of effective resource management. Much Aboriginal customary activity generates benefits at regional, Territory and national levels, particularly in the area of nature conservation, as well as generating jobs and physical and spiritual well-being for the Aboriginal people involved. Our

understandings of the value of customary activities and their articulations with the market economy are growing. There is a need to develop the case to persuade governments of the significance of such contributions: an example is Aboriginal fire programs in the Top End that not only assist biodiversity conservation, but also abate carbon and reduce smoke that can have real health consequences for residents of Darwin.

In our discussions in the next two days, we face a real public policy dilemma. On one hand, the issues we are tackling are complex and difficult, but we do not want to make them sound too difficult or we will deter even those politicians and bureaucrats of good-will who want to assist, but who also want outcomes and want them fast. On the other hand, we need to be honest about the magnitude of the task ahead of us, or we will generate impossible expectations and development goals that will set Aboriginal people up to fail.

In the division of the NT economic cake, the income data show that in 2001 Aboriginal people made up 25% of the adult population, but only got 11% of the income. This income proportion has to increase, but it will not happen by some automatic re-cutting of the cake, whether justified or not, liberal democracy does not work like that. Rather, there will need to be a joint growing of the cake, and it is only then, as the overall cake grows, that Aboriginal interests can capture a larger share. Part of this process will, I believe also require a redefinition of what constitutes the cake and its ingredients, and it is here that the case will need to be made for recognition of areas of productive activity that have until now remained unrecognised.

In our deliberations today and tomorrow we need to operate with some first principles. In my view, we need to start with a series of recognitions—of colonial history and resulting legacies and shortfalls, of cultural differences and diversity, of current Indigenous contributions, and of rights. None of us would disagree, I think, that we also need a clear recognition of the citizenship rights of Aboriginal Territorians and an adherence to fair needs-based service delivery.

There is a broad Territory-wide interest in ensuring long-term and sustainable economic futures for Indigenous Territorians, wherever they reside, and also a need to consider the costs of maintaining the unacceptable status quo. The significant inter-connections between so called Indigenous and non-Indigenous components of the NT economy are growing—in reality Indigenous communities are less and less a discrete sector and more and more a part of Australian society and economy.

Ultimately, it is imperative that at the start of the 21st Century Aboriginal people are not accepting any imposed or constraining mainstream development scenario that may not accord with their aspirations or, for the majority on Aboriginal land, that may threaten the chosen circumstances of their lives. Aboriginal people must develop capacity to be empowered to go forward boldly, articulating their visions for the future and highlighting their contributions to the Territory economy, while also looking to new opportunities and innovations for sustainable futures, wherever they reside.